

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 007116

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/14/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#) [BURMA](#)

SUBJECT: DAS ERIC JOHN'S MEETING WITH FORMER FOREIGN
MINISTER SURIN PITSUWAN

REF: A. A: BANGKOK 002255

[B](#). B: BANGKOK 002261

[C](#). C: BANGKOK 006855

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. In his meeting with EAP DAS Eric John and Ambassador Boyce, former Democrat Party Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwat, a native of and Muslim MP from the South, reiterated his well-known pessimism on the situation in that region, but in newly negative terms. Surin also presented some new, albeit vague ideas on Burma policy, outlined his frustrations with Prime Minister Thaksin's administration, gave a brief snapshot of relations with China, and talked about opposition party problems. End Summary.

A PESSIMIST ON (AND NATIVE OF) THE SOUTH GROWS GLOOMIER

[1](#)2. (C) EAP DAS Eric John and the Ambassador met with Democrat Party (DP) MP and former Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwat on November 9 at DP headquarters. Surin, a native of the southern province Nakhon Si Thammarat, is a regular mission interlocutor on the situation in the South (refs A,B). Long critical of the RTG's failings in handling the South, he is becoming even more pessimistic. "I think the South is being mishandled very badly...it's frightening." According to Surin, some police and military officials he has talked to are open about their unwillingness to face an increasingly hostile situation. As a result, more and more security personnel are holing up in their barracks. Some police have even told Surin that the violence in the three southernmost provinces "cannot be solved." The King himself, is "very concerned" about the South, according to Surin, who warns that the level of violence and deepening distrust between the Muslim and Buddhist communities is irreparable. "It's gone too far...even if we (the DP) get back into power, (I'm) not sure we can solve it."

DOWNBEAT ON BURMA, BUT SOME NEW, VAGUE IDEAS

[1](#)3. (C) Surin agreed that the state of affairs in Burma was deplorable and criticized the Thaksin administration's policy of engagement. Surin explained that under the Chuan government of the 1990's (when he was foreign minister) Thai policy was much more confrontational with the military regime. This approach facilitated international discussion of and pressure on the junta in Rangoon. Since coming into office in 2001, Thaksin has focused on trade, tourism and exploiting Burmese national resources. In effect, he has "bilateralized" the Burma issue. Thailand's newfound engagement with the regime protects it from international pressure, with Bangkok as the buffer. According to Surin, Thai policy towards Burma also suffers from the "CEO-style" of the current Prime Minister. Every decision has to be cleared by him, his family and inner circle, and invariably someone in that group is likely to have business interests that preclude new, tougher policy approaches.

[1](#)4. (C) Surin also echoed the concern among some NGOs that neither engagement nor isolationism has had much impact on the regime in Rangoon. That said, Surin has an idea for a "vision" project funded by private NGOs designed to facilitate democratic change in Burma. By presenting to the Burmese people a comprehensive vision of what their country would look like in twenty years if democracy and national reconciliation took root, Surin hopes to inspire a "people power" movement to bring down the military junta. When pressed, Surin admitted that the details of this plan had not been worked out yet.

THAI TIES TO CHINA

[1](#)5. (C) Surin expressed concern that, while relations with Beijing are "very close, very intimate," Thaksin's overriding focus on economic issues may be perceived as a willingness to do Beijing's bidding on other fronts. According to Surin, this has led the Chinese to think "we can do anything with the Thai."

OPPOSITION POLITICS

16. (C) Commenting on the recent by-elections (ref C) where the opposition picked up three new seats, Surin believes that the Thai people are waking up to the need for a larger and more active opposition party role in politics. For the Democrat Party (DP), whose stronghold is in the South, the recent violence puts them in a difficult position. Southern voters see the DP as not doing enough to protect their rights from the heavy-handed security forces, while voters in other parts of the country believe that the DP isn't doing enough to help crack down on insurgents.

COMMENT

17. (C) While hardly a non-partisan figure, Surin is less reflexively anti-Thaksin than some other opposition elders. Surin's portrayal of the situation in the South tends to be more grim perhaps than other "neutral" observers. Nonetheless, Surin's views have special credence given his academic background, broad experience, and extensive network of contacts. His pessimism about the current landscape in the South--that the violence may be intractable and is destined to get worse--unfortunately is shared by many.

18. (U) DAS John cleared this message.
BOYCE